The Seventh Commandment

Exodus 20:14

Study

Our paper examines the Seventh Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:14, which addresses the sanctity of marriage and the sin of adultery. The commandment declares, "You shall not commit adultery," establishing God's design for sexual purity and marital faithfulness. Throughout Scripture, marriage is presented as a sacred covenant between one man and one woman, reflecting the relationship between Christ and His Church. The Seventh Commandment protects this God-ordained institution by forbidding any sexual activity outside the marriage bond. This prohibition extends beyond the physical act of adultery to encompass lustful thoughts, improper desires, and any behavior that violates the exclusive nature of the marriage covenant.[1] The commandment reveals God's holy standard for sexual conduct and His concern for the welfare of families, the foundation of society. For the Church, this commandment calls believers to pursue purity in thought and deed, to honor marriage as God has ordained it, and to flee from all forms of sexual immorality.

Introduction

Marriage stands as one of the first institutions God established in human history.[2] Before government, before the church, before any other human relationship, God created marriage. In Genesis 2:24, we read, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This foundational statement declares God's design for marriage, a lifelong, exclusive union between one man and one woman. Everything that follows in Scripture regarding human sexuality must be understood in light of this original design.

The Seventh Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," protects the sanctity of this marriage covenant. In giving this command, God establishes a boundary line that must not be

[1] Matthew 5:27-30

[2] Marriage is one of the creation ordinances. These are universal mandates given by God before sin entered the world and regardless of the fall binding on all humanity. These include labor, the sabbath, and marriage (Genesis 2:18-24), designed to regulate human relationships and society under God's good order.

crossed. He declares that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively within the marriage relationship and that violations of this principle bring serious consequences both in this life and in eternity.

Throughout the history of redemption, marriage has served as a picture of the relationship between God and His people. In the Old Testament, the prophets frequently portrayed Israel's unfaithfulness to God as spiritual adultery. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul explicitly teaches that human marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and the Church. Ephesians 5:31-32 states, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Marriage, therefore, carries significance far beyond the happiness of two individuals. It testifies to divine truth and reflects eternal realities.

In our present age, the biblical understanding of marriage and sexuality has been largely abandoned. Sexual immorality is celebrated, marital unfaithfulness is excused, and God's moral law is dismissed as outdated and oppressive. Yet the Seventh Commandment remains as relevant and necessary today as when it was first given to Moses at Mount Sinai. God and His standards have not changed, nor has the human heart's capacity for self-deception and sin. The church must continue to proclaim God's holy law while extending the hope of forgiveness and transformation through Jesus Christ.

The Meaning of Adultery

The Hebrew word translated "adultery" in Exodus 20:14 refers specifically to sexual relations between a married person and someone who is not their spouse. In the ancient Near Eastern context, this commandment primarily protected the marriage covenant from violation. Under the Mosaic law, both the adulterer and the adulteress were to be put to death, demonstrating the severity of this sin in God's eyes. John Murray, in his classic work *Principles of Conduct*, comments on the severity of this sin. He writes, “The severity of the penalty for adultery in the Mosaic law is the index to the enormity of the sin. It is a sin which strikes at the most sacred human relationship and at the foundation of human society. The family is the basic unit of social organization, and the sanctity of marriage is essential to its integrity."[3]

[3] John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 54.

Leviticus 20:10 states, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." This penalty highlights the gravity of the offense. Adultery was not merely a private matter between individuals but a crime against God, a violation of His covenant, and an assault on the foundations of society. The death penalty served both as punishment and as a deterrent, warning the people of Israel that sexual unfaithfulness would not be tolerated.

However, we must understand that the Seventh Commandment encompasses more than just the physical act of adultery. The Lord Jesus Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, expanded our understanding of this commandment to include the thoughts and desires of the heart. In Matthew 5:27-28, He declared, "You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Bishop J.C. Ryle, commenting on the Lord's words, wrote, "Our Lord Jesus Christ declares that the commandment is broken by the look of the eye when that look is the result of an impure desire within. He that looks at a woman with a lustful eye has already in God's sight committed adultery in his heart. The act is morally complete, though not outwardly performed. The sin is finished in the sight of Him who reads the inward man. God takes knowledge of thoughts and imaginations. He does not wait until iniquity is actually committed. An unholy thought conceived and entertained is sin in His sight."[4]

This teaching reveals that God's law judges not only outward actions but also the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. A person may refrain from the physical act of adultery while having lustful thoughts and desires. Such a person may appear righteous before others but stands condemned before God, who searches the heart. The Pharisees excelled at external conformity while their hearts remained far from God. Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and called for righteousness that goes beyond mere outward conformity. How self-deceived is the sinful heart of man to think that keeping the Law externally somehow gains favor in the eyes of a Holy God who knows our inmost thoughts!

[4] J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew* (1856; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1986), 42.

The Westminster Larger Catechism Question 139 provides a helpful summary of what the Seventh Commandment requires: "The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel; marriage by those that have not the gift of continency, conjugal love, and cohabitation; diligent labor in our callings; shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations thereunto."[5] This comprehensive answer shows that the commandment calls for purity in every aspect of life, not merely avoiding the physical act of adultery.

God's Design for Marriage

To understand the Seventh Commandment properly, we must first grasp God's original design for marriage. When God created Adam, He declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). God then created Eve from Adam's rib and brought her to him. Adam's response expressed both recognition and joy: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23).

The Genesis text then provides the foundational statement on marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). This verse teaches several crucial truths about marriage. First, marriage requires leaving one's parents and establishing a new family unit. Second, it involves a man holding fast to his wife, implying permanence and exclusivity. Third, the two become one flesh, indicating the profound unity that marriage creates.

This original design reveals that marriage is, by definition, the union of one man and one woman. God created humanity as male and female, and He ordained marriage as the proper context for sexual union. No other relationship can legitimately be called marriage, regardless of what human courts or cultures may declare. The creation account establishes marriage as a divine institution with boundaries set by God Himself.

[5] *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), Q. 139.

In our present age, we are witnessing an unprecedented assault on this foundational truth. Modern culture has attempted to redefine not only marriage but the very categories of male and female that God established at creation. What God has clearly distinguished, our society now claims is changeable and subject to personal choice. The same rebellious spirit that rejects God's definition of marriage also denies His creation of humanity as male and female. This is not progress but regression, producing chaos and confusion. When society abandons God's design for marriage and gender, it does not create freedom but disorder, not liberation but bondage to sin. The church must stand firm on the truth that God alone has the authority to define marriage, sexuality, and human identity. His Word is not subject to change by human opinion or cultural consensus.

Marriage also serves multiple purposes in God's plan. It provides companionship. Adam needed a helper fit for him, someone with whom he could share life and labor. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 speaks of the value of companionship: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"

Marriage also provides the proper context for sexual intimacy. First Corinthians 7:2-3 states, "But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband." Sexual relations within marriage are not merely permitted but commanded, a gift from God to be enjoyed with thanksgiving and purity.

Additionally, marriage is designed for procreation. God's first command to humanity was to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Children are a heritage from the Lord, a blessing to be received with gratitude. While not every marriage results in children, the procreative potential of a husband and wife reflects God's creative purposes.

Marriage also pictures the relationship between Christ and the Church. This profound truth, revealed in the New Testament, gives marriage its deepest significance. As Christ gave Himself for the Church and the Church submits to Christ, so husbands are to love their wives sacrificially

and wives are to respect and submit to their husbands. This parallel transforms our understanding of marriage from a mere human contract to a living parable of divine love.[6]

The Seriousness of Adultery

Scripture consistently presents adultery as a grievous sin with devastating consequences. Proverbs 6:32-33 warns, "He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself. He will get wounds and dishonor, and his reproach will not be wiped away." The consequences of adultery extend far beyond the immediate act, affecting the adulterer's reputation, relationships, and spiritual well-being.

The Old Testament records numerous examples of the destructive power of adultery. David's adultery with Bathsheba resulted in the death of their first child, violence within David's own household, and the sword never departing from his house (2 Samuel 12:10,14). Though David repented and received forgiveness, the temporal consequences of his sin continued throughout his life. Psalm 51, David's great confession of sin, reveals the anguish of a soul convicted of adultery and murder.

In Proverbs 5:3 and 5, Solomon warns against the adulterous woman: "For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol." The imagery is vivid and sobering. What may appear attractive and pleasurable in the moment ultimately leads to spiritual death. The momentary pleasure of sin cannot compare to the lasting damage it inflicts. If we are Christians, we must treasure fellowship and peace with God more than the passing pleasures of sin.

The New Testament is equally clear about the seriousness of adultery. In Matthew 15:19, Jesus listed adultery among the evil things that come from the heart and defile a person. In Galatians 5:19,21, Paul identified adultery as one of the works of the flesh and warned, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." This is not to say that those who commit adultery cannot be forgiven, but it does indicate that unrepentant, habitual adultery demonstrates a heart that has not been transformed by grace.

[6] Ephesians 5:22-33

Hebrews 13:4 declares, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." God's judgment awaits those who persist in sexual immorality without repentance. This sobering truth should cause us to take the Seventh Commandment with utmost seriousness.

Beyond the spiritual consequences, adultery destroys trust, damages families, and harms innocent people, especially children. When a husband or wife breaks the marriage covenant through unfaithfulness, the resulting pain radiates outward, affecting not only the couple but their children, extended family, and even the church family. The violation of trust can take years to heal, if it heals at all in this life. Some marriages survive adultery through genuine repentance and forgiveness, but the scars often remain.

Sexual Immorality in Our Age

While the Seventh Commandment specifically addresses adultery, it also includes all forms of sexual immorality. The Greek word "porneia," used throughout the New Testament, refers broadly to sexual sin of every kind. This includes fornication, that is, sexual relations between unmarried persons, as well as homosexual behavior, incest, bestiality, and all other deviations from God's created design for sexuality.

First Corinthians 6:18,20 commands, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Sexual sin is unique in that it involves the body in a particularly intimate way. Because believers' bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, sexual immorality defiles what God has set apart for Himself.

We live in an age of rampant sexual immorality. What previous generations considered shameful is now openly celebrated. Sex before marriage is assumed to be normal. Adultery is excused and often sought out. The internet has made pornography readily available and widely consumed. Homosexual behavior, once universally condemned in Christian societies, is now affirmed and promoted. In many countries, annual parades are held to show “pride” in their immoral lifestyle. Marriage itself is being redefined to include relationships that God's Word clearly condemns.

God's Word reveals to us His judgment. The Word of God does not remain silent about such things. The Psalmist described the spirit of our age precisely when he wrote, "On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the children of man" (Psalm 12:8).

In the last section of chapter one of the letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul provides a vivid description of the behaviors of those who have rejected the Word of God. He writes, "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them" (Romans 1:32). Not only do so many practice behaviors God hates, but those who do *not* practice them now also approve of those who do! This is the culture of America today, and without a doubt, many other countries. How fitting are the words of the Psalmist when he writes, "The nations have sunk in the pit that they have made; in the net that they hid, their own foot has been caught. The LORD has made himself known; he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their hands" (Psalm 9:15-16). Dear Christian, let us cry out to our great God for His mercy and grace!

The church has not been immune to this cultural shift. Many professing Christians see nothing wrong with sexual activity before marriage. Others justify divorce for reasons beyond the biblical grounds of adultery or abandonment. Still others have embraced the culture's acceptance of homosexuality, arguing that love justifies any consensual relationship. Such positions represent a fundamental rejection of biblical authority and God's clear moral standards. Instead of being a light on a hill for all to see, many believers have covered their lights to the great detriment of our culture!

Albert Mohler Jr. summarizes the current tragedy we face in our culture. He writes, "The moral revolution of our times represents nothing less than a complete reversal of Christian sexual morality. What was once forbidden is now celebrated. What was once shameful is now a matter of pride. The very categories of male and female, the institution of marriage, and the integrity of the family are now considered negotiable. This revolution did not happen overnight, but it has reached a point of cultural saturation. The church now faces a test of faithfulness unlike anything

seen in recent centuries. Will we bend to the spirit of the age, or will we stand firm on the Word of God?"[7]

The effects of widespread sexual immorality are devastating. Families are fractured. Children grow up without both parents. Sexually transmitted diseases continue to spread. Emotional and psychological damage affects millions. Yet our society continues down the same path, refusing to acknowledge that God's ways are best and that His commandments are given for our good. Christians must pray that God the Holy Spirit would come in power to awaken multitudes to their sin and to the need for the Savior.

Romans 1:24,26,27 describes God's judgment on sexual immorality: "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." When a society persistently rejects God's standards, He gives them over to their sinful desires, allowing them to experience the natural consequences of their rebellion.

Guarding Against Temptation

Given the seriousness of sexual sin, remaining sin, and the pervasiveness of sexual temptation in our culture, how can believers guard themselves? Scripture provides clear instructions on this vital matter.

It is vital that the Christian recognize the deceitfulness of sin. Sexual temptation often begins with seemingly innocent thoughts or actions. A second glance becomes a lustful look. A casual conversation becomes an emotional attachment. What starts as curiosity about pornography develops into lustful addiction. Hebrews 3:13 warns us to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Sin promises pleasure but delivers death. It appears harmless, but leads to destruction.

[7] R. Albert Mohler Jr., *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 17-18.

In addition, we must guard our hearts and minds. Proverbs 4:23 instructs, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." What we allow into our minds through entertainment, media, and conversation will affect our hearts. If we fill our minds with impure images and ideas, we should not be surprised when sinful desires take root. Philippians 4:8 provides the positive alternative: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." The Puritan Thomas Watson wisely observed, "The first rise of sin is in the mind. The mind is the shop where sin is framed and contrived. All mischief is first hatched there and then brought forth."[8] This insight underscores why believers must be diligent about what they allow into their minds. As has often been said, today's thoughts become tomorrow's actions.

Guarding against temptation also means avoiding situations that create opportunities for it. First Thessalonians 5:22 says, "Abstain from every form of evil." Joseph's response to Potiphar's wife provides a model for us. When she attempted to seduce him, he refused her advances and eventually fled from her presence (Genesis 39:7,12). He understood that remaining in her presence would only increase the danger. We must be equally willing to flee from situations that put us at risk of sexual sin.

Another duty is to actively pursue purity. Writing to his young protégé Timothy, the Apostle Paul commands him in 2 Timothy 2:22, "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." Purity is not merely the absence of impurity but the active pursuit of holiness. We must cultivate godly desires, develop accountability relationships, and fill our lives with pursuits that honor God.

Finally, we must remember that we are not our own. First Corinthians 6:19-20 declares, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Our bodies belong to God by both creation and redemption. We have no right to use them in

[8] Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good* (1663; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 91.

ways that dishonor Him. This truth should motivate us to pursue holiness in all areas of life, including our sexuality.

The Hope of the Gospel

The law of God, including the Seventh Commandment, shows us our sin and our need for a Savior. No one can claim to have kept this commandment perfectly. Even if we have not committed physical adultery, we have all sinned in our thoughts and desires. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:27-28 leaves no room for self-righteousness. We all stand condemned before God's holy Law.

Yet this is exactly where the gospel brings hope. Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, perfectly kept every commandment on behalf of His people. He never entertained a lustful thought. He never looked at another with impure desires. He remained perfectly pure in thought, word, and deed throughout His entire earthly life. This perfect righteousness is credited to all who trust in Him by faith.

Moreover, Christ bore the punishment for our sexual sins on the cross. The wrath that our adultery, fornication, and lustful thoughts deserved fell upon Him. He suffered and died so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. First Peter 2:24 declares, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

The gospel also brings the power to overcome sin. Those who are in Christ have been given the Holy Spirit, who works within them to transform their desires and strengthen them against temptation. First Corinthians 6:9,11 lists various sins, including sexual immorality and adultery, and then declares, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Past sin does not determine our identity! Through Christ, we can be washed clean and empowered to live in purity.

This does not mean that the struggle against sexual temptation will be easy or that victory will be immediate and complete. Remaining sin continues to wage war against the new nature that

believers have received in Christ. But it does mean that we have hope. We are not slaves to our passions. We have been set free to serve God in righteousness and holiness.

For those who have fallen into sexual sin, even grievous sin like adultery, there is hope for restoration through genuine repentance. David committed adultery and murder, yet when he truly repented, God forgave him. Psalm 51:1-2 records his prayer: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" God did forgive David, though the consequences of his sin remained. The same mercy is available to all who come to God with genuine repentance and faith in Christ.

Application for the Church Today

How then should the church apply the Seventh Commandment in our current cultural context? There are several practical applications that follow from our study.

To begin with, the church must teach clearly and consistently about God's design for marriage and sexuality. We cannot assume that people, even those raised in the church, understand biblical sexual ethics. The culture's messages are loud and persistent. The church's voice must be equally clear and grounded in Scripture. We must teach that marriage is between one man and one woman, that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively within marriage, and that all other sexual activity is sin. We must teach and preach what the Word of God teaches us in this area.

We must prepare young people for marriage and help them maintain purity before marriage. This includes teaching them to guard their hearts and minds, to avoid situations that create temptation, and to view their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. We must also help them understand that sexual desire is not sinful in itself but is a good gift from God to be expressed within the bounds He has established.

Also, the church must support and strengthen marriages. We should provide marriage enrichment opportunities, counseling for struggling couples, and biblical teaching on the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. Strong marriages serve as a testimony to the watching world and provide stability for the next generation.

In addition, we must exercise church discipline when members persist in unrepentant sexual sin. While this is an unpopular topic in our age, Scripture is clear that the church has a responsibility to maintain purity among its members. First Corinthians 5 provides instruction on dealing with sexual immorality within the church. The goal of such discipline is always restoration, calling the sinning member to repentance so that they may be restored to fellowship.

Christians should extend compassion and hope to those who struggle with sexual sin. The church should be a place where people can confess their struggles and find support in overcoming them. We must avoid both excusing sin and withholding mercy from those who fall. Jesus demonstrated perfect balance, showing compassion to sinners while calling them to repentance and holy living. This includes helping those wounded by sexual sin, whether as victims of abuse or as spouses who have experienced betrayal. The church should be a place of healing where wounded people can find comfort, support, and practical help as they seek to recover from the damage caused by sin.

Ultimately, we must remember that our hope is not in our ability to keep God's law but in Christ's perfect obedience and sacrifice on our behalf. We preach the law to show people their need for the gospel. We preach the gospel to offer them hope and transformation. Both are essential. Both must be proclaimed with clarity and conviction.

Conclusion

The Seventh Commandment stands as God's protection for marriage and His standard for sexual purity. In commanding, "You shall not commit adultery," God establishes a boundary that must not be crossed. He declares that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively within the marriage covenant between one man and one woman and that violations of this principle carry serious consequences.

This commandment reveals God's wisdom and care for His people. He knows that sexual sin destroys individuals, damages families, and undermines the fabric of society. He knows that departure from His design leads to misery and bondage. His commandment is not an arbitrary restriction but loving protection.

Throughout history, violations of this commandment have brought devastating results. From David's adultery with Bathsheba to the sexual immorality that characterized pagan cultures, the consequences of sexual sin are evident. Our own age, which has largely rejected biblical sexual ethics, demonstrates the same destructive patterns. Broken families, damaged children, widespread disease, and emotional trauma testify to the wisdom of God's ways.

The Seventh Commandment is not merely prohibitive. It also points us to the beauty of God's design for marriage. When lived according to God's plan, marriage brings joy, companionship, and fulfillment. It provides a stable environment for raising children. It pictures the relationship between Christ and the Church. It testifies to God's goodness and faithfulness.

For those who have violated this commandment, whether in act or in thought, the gospel offers hope. Jesus Christ kept every commandment perfectly on behalf of His people. He bore the punishment for sexual sin on the cross. He offers forgiveness to all who repent and believe. He gives power to overcome temptation and live in purity. No sin is too great for His grace to cover. No failure is beyond His power to redeem.

The church must continue to proclaim both the law and the gospel. We must teach God's standards for sexual conduct without compromise or apology. We must also extend the hope of forgiveness and transformation to those who have fallen short. We must support marriages, protect purity, and help those who struggle. We must be a community where holiness is pursued, and love and grace are abundant.

May God grant us wisdom to understand His design for marriage and sexuality. May He give us strength to resist temptation and pursue purity. May He enable us to honor marriage as He has ordained it. And may we find our ultimate satisfaction not in earthly pleasures but in knowing and serving the One who created us for Himself. To Him be glory both now and forever.

"Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble" (Psalm 119:165).